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Christian People Across the Centuries (Book Reviews)

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In 1874 John Richard Green (1837-83) published his Short History of the English People, which he promptly followed up with his multi-volume A History of the English People (1878-80). Green’s work was an influential landmark in the emergence of modern social historiography. “The people” certainly emerged more fully in the nineteenth century. William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98) became known as “the People’s William.” For his part, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) referred respectfully to the “ordinary people” (“de kleine luyden”), who gave him their support, and he was not beyond learning central truths from a resolute Pietje Balthus, an unaffected farmer’s wife.

There was something new in this emergence of “the people.” The great historical writers of the Italian renaissance—such as Leonardo di Bruni (1369-1444) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540)—although they referred to “the people,” perhaps inevitably concentrated on the holders and users of power. Among such writers the influence of classical Greek and Roman models reigned supreme. Only in the succeeding centuries, and not least arising from the subtler influences of Protestantism, did something like “public opinion” and “the voice of the people” become more pronounced. However, it is at just this later stage of the story that we must pause to make two cautionary points.

Firstly, much history-writing, following in the footsteps of giants such as Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), has continued to focus on the actions of elites. This was and is understandable because historiography addresses how we use (and misuse), generation by generation, the power that has been given us to form and shape human culture, and rightly or wrongly, a great deal of that power is in the hands of elites.

Secondly, the old-style scholastic theologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both Catholic and Protestant—with all their architectonic-systematic refinements—were not equipped to address the great unfolding of science and society that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The result was an absence of an adequately articulated Christian view of society. Therefore, when a historiography of society and the so-called “ordinary people” emerged, it tended to reflect the ways in which secularist and materialistic ideologies of the Enlightenment and French Revolution had come to shape social and economic thinking.

This tendency helps to explain why, although Christians should be concerned, as we are called to care for the “least of these” (Matthew 25.40) and more specifically called numerous times to care for the “widow and the orphan” (James 1.27). Those involved in Early Childhood Education as well as those concerned with all issues relating to social justice should be spurred by Polakow’s book to advocate for women and especially children suffering from a system that leaves them without the help they need.

While Polakow is explicit about what is currently wrong with the system, she neglects to follow up with her suggestions or recommendations. Perhaps the reason she mentions no strengths is that there are none.

Polakow does discuss three current proposals in response to these shortcomings, but she herself admits that these proposals are expensive and difficult to get through the legislative process, especially when it comes to financing (177-184). Though the three proposals she mentions may have their flaws, they are a good starting point for our country to begin the discourse on this topic. It is hard to imagine that the childcare system is or will be handled by the current administration any time soon, with issues of healthcare, defense, and homeland security seeming to dominate much of the time and money available. It is not difficult to see, however, how investing money in our country’s children will actually save taxpayers money down the road. But more importantly, ensuring that every child in this country has safe, stable, and quality child care and early-childhood education may have ramifications for health care and security for us all. Who Cares for Our Children? secures not only the health and well-being of that society but also its heart.

Endnotes


the writing of social history made great strides in the
nineteenth century, the development nevertheless came
with repeated challenges from traditionalists. There were
recurring confrontations between “history from above”—
the historiography of elite action in the tradition of von
Ranke—and “history from below”—often, but not
inevitably, reflective of collectivist democratic ideologies.
Some represented social history as “history with the politics
left out,” while witty traditionalists asserted that it was
“history with the history left out”—and with a great deal of
ideology inserted. All the same, “history from below” has
not withered away but has become organized, frequently
in an ideologically laden manner, around the foci of
“class” and “gender”—often with “race” included for good
measure. In not a few contemporary secular university
history departments a pronounced orientation around this
triad of priorities is de rigueur.

So, as we pick up these three initial volumes of A
People's History of Christianity, we must ask this question:
“Is this history of Christian people shaped by the secular
ideologies that have also formed social theory and
much of the writing of social history in the twentieth
century?” In the case of these volumes the question must
be answered with care. As each volume contains more
than ten contributions from different authors, there is
inevitably a certain unevenness in pace and tone. In their
introductory contributions, Richard Horsley (1: 1-5, 11-
20), and Virginia Burrus with Rebecca Lyman (2: 2-19),
all signal their awareness of the question. For this reviewer,
the overall tenor reflects the contemporary “class” and
“gender” prioritizations, for example, in discussions of
social stratification among Christians (1: 140-3; 178-80, 2:
22-68, 3: 9-11), or the position of Christian women in the
ancient church (1: 270-86, 2: 181-9, 3: 201-20), but it does
not lapse into ideologically over-loaded polemic. Twenty-
first century “class” and “gender” prioritizations sometimes
seem to hover in the text, but not so obtrusively as to negate
the usefulness—and at some points fascination—of these
volumes.

Certainly, some readers will be discomfited by the tone
set by William R. Herzog’s “Why Peasants Responded to
Jesus” (v. 1, 47-70). Those committed to a version of the
faith characterized by other-worldly spirituality will find
this contribution difficult to take because it effectively
drives us towards the original socio-economic context of
Christ’s teaching. It offers a strong explanation of how he
was heard. In this respect it is valuable. Yet it is necessary to
say much more. The gospels are clear that Jesus was often
misunderstood, even by his own disciples. It is necessary
to keep in view that the kingdom of heaven was not to
be some restoration of a past Mosaic or Davidic order.
Moreover, depictions of Jesus as a rebel need to be handled
with great care. He was not, after all, yet another Barabbas.

Jesus was not offering a Davidic-restoration-
liberationist alternative within the prevailing system, but
proclaiming a regime of deliverance and renewal from that
total system. In that respect he was doubly-dangerous to
the Jewish and Roman systems alike. He had to die—and
thereby came the deliverance! An analysis of Jesus’ ministry
and earliest Christianity that is too exclusively oriented
Towards the main-line social science priorities of “class
and gender” can be problematic because they can lead us
to seriously underestimate just how radical the announced
kingdom is to be: a kingdom that is for this world while not
of this world.

As a counter-part and cross-check to histories of
Christianty that focus on the “big names,” these volumes
are invaluable. Together they constitute a wide-ranging
array of important secondary source materials and should
not be ignored by either students of history or seminarians.
The influences of contemporary secular social-sience
theory should not preclude the reading these works, even as
they serve to confirm the ever-present need for discernment.
And there are some little gems here. For example, those
who recall John Calvin’s respect for Chrysostom will
appreciate Jaclyn Maxwell’s contribution on “Lay Piety
in the Sermons of John Chrysostom,” with its references
to the Christianization of culture and encouragement of
public righteousness (3: 19-38).

We need accounts of the lives, thoughts, and actions
of those Christian men and women who were not the big
leaders and prominent authors—especially for eras prior to
the eighteenth century. Yet we need more. Those who set
out to write the history of Christianity “from below” can
still be laboring under the pull of an “above” and “below”
polarity. We need a more integral history-writing that
will dispense with the “above” and “below” bifurcation.
Arguably this distinction, when now made in “Christian”
discourse, arises from the historical juncture in the fourth
century at which Christianity itself became aligned with
empire, power and privilege. We still have to grapple
adequately with the transformations that we associate with
Constantine, Eusebius and Theodosius—all “big names.”
We are left wrestling with the question of how all that has
followed relates to the message of Jesus that those distant
“ordinary folk” heard so gladly (Mark 12.37).